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The Wedding  
of Cana –  
A Biblical  
Meditation

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# The Wedding of Cana – A Biblical Meditation

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This year marks the 20th birthday of the Luminous Mysteries. Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* instituted the new set of five mysteries.<sup>1</sup> As the letter notes, the prayer of the rosary has already been practised for almost 1,000 years, although it achieved prominence only from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards with the arrival of the mendicants, particularly the Dominicans. There was an inherent harmony to the traditional rosary with the prayer of the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious mysteries, giving a total of 150 Hail Marys, which matched the number of psalms in the psalter. However, the mysteries focused on the incarnation and the passion, death, and resurrection but not on the life and ministry of Jesus from the Baptism to the Passion. The *five* luminous mysteries chosen to reflect on this period are a very small selection from many possible options, much as the evangelist John chooses only a restricted number of signs from many (20:30).<sup>2</sup> The *purpose* in the choice of the mysteries and of the signs is similar, that those who meditate upon them might grow in belief (20:31). Of the five luminous mysteries, only the wedding of Cana is drawn from John's Gospel (2:1-11). It is a sparkling facet of the divine diamond that can draw those who care to meditate upon it deeper into the mystery of Christ.<sup>3</sup> This short article will draw upon the numerous allusions and echoes within this passage to the Old Testament to develop a more holistic biblical meditation.

1 The text of the Apostolic letter is available at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/2002/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20021016\\_rosarium-virginis-mariae.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20021016_rosarium-virginis-mariae.html)

2 As there are frequent references to John's Gospel only chapter and verse number will be indicated.

3 The term divine diamond is drawn from the title of Kevin O'Gorman's recent book: *Divine Diamond: Facets of the Fourth Gospel*. Dublin: Messerian Press, 2021.

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### THE THIRD DAY – SPECIAL TIMES FOR PRAYER

The wedding takes place on the third day, but there is no indication of the exact date. A third day resonates strongly with readers of the Gospel. In the following episode in the Temple, there is a dispute over Jesus' saying that he would raise up the Temple in three days. The storyteller notes the incomprehension of the Jews and how later after his resurrection, the disciples understood that Jesus was speaking of his body (2:19-21). Readers recognise this timing as echoing that of the Lord's resurrection, which invites them to interpret not only this Temple passage (2:13-22) but also the preceding Cana wedding passage with the note of the three days (2:1-12) through the prism of the resurrection. This is the temporal context, namely resurrection time, for a prayerful Christian reading of the entire Gospel.

### A CAST OF CHARACTERS

The story of Cana tells of a large gathering at a wedding, including the mother of Jesus,<sup>4</sup> Jesus himself, and his disciples. While the groom, chief steward, and servants are present, there is no mention of the bride, who presumably is present. Whereas Jesus is almost always the first character to be highlighted in any gathering, here it is his mother who is noted to have been invited and only afterwards Jesus and his disciples. The silence regarding the bride and the surprising order of the guest list point to a prominent role for the mother in the passage.

### PERCEPTION AND REQUEST – VOICING THE HUMAN NEED

The storyteller notes in an aside that the wine has run out. No one in the wedding party seems to notice, not the bridegroom, nor the bride. Amidst all the revelry, it is the mother of Jesus who recognises the true situation, the true need. She turns to Jesus and says to him: "They have no wine." The mother's words represent a change from the storyteller's objective report. She might have simply said: "there is no wine". Instead she notes the human need, it is people who lack the wine. It is not yet clear who "they" refers to. Perhaps it refers to the bride and groom or to their families, perhaps to the guests or to the entire gathering, servants included. The mother might have averted to the fact that the reputation of the bride and groom and their families is at stake, or suggested a course of action to remedy the situation. Instead, she leaves it to open to Jesus as to how to respond. The mother of Jesus is here a *model* not only

4 Jesus' mother is never referred to as "Mary" in John's Gospel. She reappears at the cross (19:25-27) but this related episode is examined here.

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of perception and but also of appropriate intercession. Many with minds cluttered by distraction and noise find it hard to discern what is truly needed. In this context, the example of the mother of Jesus might be followed, or she herself could be invoked to perceive the true human need and to bring that need to the attention of her Son.

### AN OPEN RESPONSE SUFFUSED WITH HOPE

Jesus' reply to his mother, "What is it to me and to you, woman?" (John 2:4a) seems rather brusque. The question occurs only four times in the Old Testament and twice with the same interlocutors. David uses this question in response to Abishai who wishes to cut down Shimei for insulting the king as he flees Jerusalem during Absalom's revolt (2 Sam 16:9-10). David refuses his request and entrusts the situation to the Lord that he might repay him with good in return for the cursing (2 Sam 16:12). This is later proved when after Absalom's death Abishai asks again whether he might dispatch Shimei. David responds by asking the same question, before assuring Shimei of his life (2 Sam 19:21-23). The widow of Zarephath also asks this question of Elijah since her son has died, to which Elijah responds by interceding with the Lord to raise her son (1 Kings 17:17-24). Jesus by voicing this question evokes texts associated with *new opportunities* for life, either a life spared (Shimei) or a life restored (the widow's son), through recourse to God. Within the biblical lexicon, Jesus' choice of words imply not a refusal, but that he refers the matter to God within a life-giving perspective. His words are, therefore, ultimately full of promise.<sup>5</sup>

### MOTHER – WOMAN

Jesus appears to put distance between himself and his mother with the use of the term "*woman*". However, this address highlights the absence of the bride, who is the one that should be addressed as "*woman*". The early prominence of the mother is now even more in evidence as she is accorded the primary female role at the wedding feast by Jesus. While the address still sounds gruff to contemporary ears, it too has positive echoes in the Bible. Along with "*mother*", the term is used twice to praise the heroine in the fourth book of the Maccabees who encouraged her seven sons to remain faithful to the Lord through their martyrdom (4 Macc 15:16-17; 16:14). The context of her encouragement is hope in the resurrection. The same address, "*woman*", will be used at the well by Jesus with the Samaritan within their discussion of living water and true worship

5 For an ample and yet accessible exposition of readings of John's Gospel in the light of the Old Testament, see Seán Goan, *The Sign. Reading the Gospel of John*. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2018.

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(4:21), and at the tomb (by the angels 20:13) and by the Risen Jesus (20:15) when addressing Mary Magdalene. The address and associated question resonate with hope of new life.

### RESPONSE TO PRAYER – A QUESTION OF TIMING

Jesus continues to speak: “My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4b). Jesus is not the subject of the coming of his hour. He speaks of a coming hour, but entrusts the timing to the will of the Father. Two attempts to arrest Jesus in the Temple fail because his hour has not yet come (7:30; 8:20) and not because he refused to accept his hour. When the hour arrives, Jesus accepts all that it entails: the manifestation of his glory is bound to his lifting up on the Cross and to the Father (John 12:23; 13:31-32). At this moment Jesus prays to the Father and is graced with a response: “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again” (12:27-28). The *response* indicates that the Father has long been at work in the world through Jesus and will continue to work especially through Jesus’ imminent passion, death, and resurrection. The hour of passion will become the hour of glory. The coming of the hour has multiple other resonances in this Gospel. It is the future time of true worship of the Father in Spirit and in Truth (4:21, 23) and when the dead in the tombs will rise and hear the voice of the Son of God and live (5:25, 28). The words of Jesus resonate with greater hope than might be imagined, hope in the coming resurrection and its fruits. The words also constitute an example of trust in the Father and that he will respond in time, often revealing how he has long been at work with us, something we only discover *after* the events. This is the experience of many who perhaps have suffered a close bereavement, the breakup of a relationship, the loss of a job, or the horrors of addiction and often only later recognise how they could never have managed without the Lord’s help or without the promise of definitive redemption from sin and death through Jesus’ paschal mystery.

### RECOGNISING THE VOICE OF THE LORD – DISCERNING OBEDIENCE

The mother of Jesus turns to speak to the servants. She has brought the situation of human need to Jesus and no longer requires to speak to him. Instead, she paves the way for others to trust in him. Ancient readers might at first wonder that the mother deals with the servants rather than the groom or the chief steward, those directly or indirectly in charge of the banquet. The mother by bringing the lack of wine to Jesus’ attention and by directing the servants to

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him, implicitly recognises that Jesus is the one truly in charge. Any commands should come from him.

The mother's words to the servants, "*do whatever he tells you*" have a strong biblical resonance. When the seven years of famine arrive in Egypt the people cry out to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh responds by redirecting them to Joseph with the command that they should do whatever he tells them (Gen 41:55). There are many analogies that might be drawn here - the parallel situation of human need, the referral to Joseph and to one known as son of Joseph (1:45; 6:42), and the similar command. There is a slight shift in the tense of the verb "tell". Pharaoh uses the aorist subjunctive with a nuance of a punctual or once-off obedience, whereas the mother uses a present subjunctive with a nuance of *continued* obedience. The command to obey Joseph is valid for the particular moment of famine, that to obey Jesus is valid forever.

In Egypt, many come to Joseph, but only one group is given a direct command echoing the words of Pharaoh. This group comprises Joseph's 10 brothers who are in captivity on the charge of spying out the land. After three days Joseph says to them: "Do this and you shall live, for I fear God" (Gen 42:18). While obedience to Joseph brings food to the famished, it brings something more to his brothers, namely, life. The mother's command to obey whatever Jesus should tell them is expected to meet the human need, no longer of bread but now of wine. Obedience to Jesus' command once again carries strong resonances of the resurrection, with the promise of life emerging on the third day. Furthermore, both bread and wine carry strong eucharistic resonances for readers of the Gospel.

## THE JEWISH SETTING – PROMISES FULFILLED AND TO BE FULFILLED

The storyteller pauses the action to describe the scene. "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons" (2:6). The Jewish setting is strongly emphasised. Earthenware jars cannot be used for purification purposes as they can become definitively contaminated, whereas stone jars can be made clean after contamination. First century Judaism took purity concerns seriously and many stone vessels and ritual baths have been found in archaeological sites in Judea and Galilee. Furthermore, the adjective "stone" used for the jars is used 12 times for the stone tablets of the Law in Exodus and Deuteronomy, while the numeral "6" occurs frequently in the Bible to designate the 6 days of work before the day of rest and so it too recalls the Law. The number of the jars is suggestive of the imminent completion of

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time – that the seventh day is approaching, the Sabbath, which commemorates the creation (Exod 20:8-11) and the deliverance from Egypt (Deut 5:12-15). This day carries a further reference for readers of the Gospel as the day of resurrection. The adjective “stone” is also used of *hearts* in Ezekiel, a prophet much alluded to by the evangelist John, that the Lord will turn into hearts of flesh (Ezek 11:19; 36:36).<sup>6</sup> This promised transformation is understood as being made possible through Jesus’ death and resurrection. The mention of the stony vessels hints that this time of transformation is imminent.

The term for water jar is mostly used in the Bible for taking water from a well (Gen 24:14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 43, 45; Eccl 12:6) but can be repurposed for holding torches (Judges 7:16, 19, 20) and for holding flour (1 Kings 17:8-16). It is this last use that is first evoked here. Elijah is sent by the Lord to the widow of Zarephath at a time of famine. At Elijah’s request for something to eat, she reports that she has only enough for a last meal before she and her son die. Elijah tells her to do as she has said and to make a little cake for him first, but issues this promise from the Lord: “the jar of flour will not be emptied, and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth” (1 Kings 17:14). The widow trusting in the Lord obeys Elijah and gives him the cake to eat. The promise of the Lord comes to pass, as he provides flour in the jar for the duration of the famine (1 Kings 17:16). The echoes with Cana are multiple, the situation of human need, the empty jar(s), trust in the Lord and obedience. The widow is a model of human cooperation which comes between promise and fulfilment. The mother invites the servants to cooperate. The careful description of the scene evokes the Lord’s long relationship with Israel and his work of salvation. Readers anticipate further salvific work through the cooperation of the servants but given the gargantuan volume of the jars something of another order.

### FROM HEARING TO DOING

The storyteller reports Jesus giving the servants two contrasting orders, *first* to fill the jars with water and then to draw some out and bring to the chief steward. The exact words of Jesus are reported in direct speech (“fill the jars with water” [2:7]) because of the earlier command of his mother to the servants (“do whatever he tells you” [2:5]). Both the servants and readers get to hear the words of Jesus. This allows readers to assess the servants’ response. There is a ready response to the first order. Despite the gargantuan size and the effort involved, the servants fill the jars to the very brim. The

6 Gary T. Manning, *Echoes of a Prophet: The Use of Ezekiel in the Gospel of John and in Literature of the Second Temple Period*. LNTS 270. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

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exact words of the *second* order are also in direct speech (“Now draw some out and take it to the chief steward” [2:8a]) but on this occasion initially only the taking of what is drawn to the steward is reported (2:8b). The ready response of the servants to Jesus’ word has already been demonstrated.

### WHO KNOWS WHEN AND HOW THE LORD ACTS?

The storyteller gives access to the interactions between Jesus and his mother and then the mother with the servants, and finally Jesus and the servants, which all take place in the background during the wedding festivities. The others at the wedding are unaware of what is taking place as is made explicit in the speech of the chief steward. There is an aside to readers which explains that the steward did not know where the wine came from but that the servants who had drawn the water knew (2:9). The origin of Jesus is a commonly discussed issue in the Gospel signalled with the same interrogative pronoun “whence” (from where). Most do not know and assume that he is the son of Joseph from Nazareth (1:45; 6:42) but readers know that he is from God (1:1-5). Jesus speaks all that he has heard from the Father, so his word is indeed God’s word (12:49). Hearing and responding to Jesus’ word allows the servants not only to cooperate in Jesus’ work but also to come to know Jesus and through him the Father.

The servants had filled the jars to the brim. In antiquity, wine is always mixed with water before drinking. This wine is undiluted and of excellent quality. The chief steward, unaware of the wine’s true origin, calls the bridegroom to commend him on serving the good wine last. This indicates that the wine is the responsibility of the bridegroom. For the steward and guests it is he who has supplied the wine but the servants and the readers know that it is Jesus who has assumed the bridegroom’s role and provided the wine. In the Bible God is often viewed as bridegroom to his unfaithful bride, namely his people Israel, and the coming Messiah is to take the bridegroom’s role and restore the fractured relationship with Israel. Since Jesus here is implicitly manifested as the Messianic Bridegroom readers would draw upon these biblical traditions, especially Hosea 1-2. The setting of the wedding, the use of the address “woman”, the evocation of the betrothal of Isaac and Rebecca through the mention of the water jar which occurs (8 times) in the meeting at the well of Isaac’s servant and Rebecca (Gen 24), all point to Jesus’ identity as the Messianic Bridegroom. Within this contextual reading, the abundance of wine suggests the eschatological feast that accompanies the Messianic Bridegroom’s arrival (Isa 25:6; Joel 2:24). The time of definitive salvation has come.



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Readers will likely recall that Jesus self-identifies as the true vine in the farewell discourse (15:1-8). It is wholly congruous that he should therefore provide the wine in such quantities. The story of Israel is compared to that of a vine in Psalm 80, first taken from Egypt and then planted in the promised land (Psa 80:8-11) but then later the vineyard walls are cast down, and the vine is ravaged by beasts (Psa 80:12-13). The pleas of the psalmist that the Lord look down upon his vine and restore it (Psa 80:14-19) are answered in and through Jesus who provides abundant fruit of the vine for his people. Christian prayer of the Old Testament and especially the psalms attune disciples to the presence of Jesus in our human story, past, present, and future, and empowers disciples to receive and employ the gifts that he brings.

### BELIEVING

The storyteller concludes with a summary of the passage. “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (2:11). It is only now that the disciples appear in the account after everything is accomplished. They have no role alongside Jesus and do not appear to have been present in his various dialogues involving his mother and the servants. It might have been assumed that they were among the large gathering unaware of what has happened. However, the disciples have met Jesus and spent time with him and grown to know him (1:35-51). Jesus promised Nathaniel that he would see greater things (1:50), and so he and the other disciples are attuned to this promise which is now being fulfilled at Cana. Jesus has revealed his glory, but many do not perceive. It is the disciples who have begun to know and model their lives on Jesus who recognise his saving action. It has been a long journey for the disciples, who appeared first to have been invited as an afterthought, who remained in the background and then only emerge at the end. However, through their time spent with Jesus, they are attuned to experience, recognise, and give witness to Jesus’ first manifestation of his glory and the inauguration of the final salvation. The church offers *today’s* disciples the luminous mysteries to spend time with Christ in prayerful meditation and so become attuned to his presence in their lives and to give witness to that presence in the world.<sup>7</sup>

7 This article is a summary of a talk delivered during the “Wine, Women, Men, and Song!” study day on the Wedding of Cana at Glenstal Abbey on 24th September 2022.